

THE FIVE-COLOR THEME IN
DONGBA SCRIPTURES

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ABSTRACT

I compared the two translated versions of *The Advent of Dragons* collected during fieldwork with a Ruke Dongba priest and found many inconsistencies in the same scripture and even within single verses. These inconsistencies may derive from oral composition mechanisms, for example, the aim to adapt the content to metric patterns. These complexities are mainly attested in verses related to the five-color theme, in which the five colors correspond to the mythical creatures and landscape in the five spatial directions. In the formulaic tradition of Dongba Culture, this color-related theme is delivered as a whole message produced by mentioning several keywords. However, the various details involving the keywords do not affect the meaning of the message. Consequently, the flexibilities of the content, highlighted as inconsistencies in the word-by-word translation, leave space for variants in the development of the oral culture and become formularized in various branches of Dongbaism.

KEYWORDS

Dongba, five-color theme, formularization, inconsistency and variability, Ruke, scripture for the worship of dragons, *Wu Xing*

Dongbaism is a native religion of the Naxi, one of China's fifty-six officially-recognized ethnic groups. The Naxi live on the border between Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in southwest China. The term "Dongbaism" derives from "Dongba" ([toɿmbɑ̃]) (Li Lincan et al. 1972:143), a term for local priests. Dongbaism is used to refer to local worship. The relationship between "Dongbaism" and "Dongba" resembles "Shamanism" and "Shaman." In Chinese, "Dongbaism" is called "Dongba Jiao."

Dongba scriptures are known as oral texts (Li et al. 1972:21; Yu 2009). Available sources of Dongba scripture, such as the one-hundred-volume *Naxi Dongba Guji Yizhu Quanji* 'Annotated Collection of Ancient Naxi Dongba Scriptures' documented by the Lijiang Dongba Culture Research Institute, present the scriptures with Chinese translation. The fixed text, however, often disguises the unfixed/variable nature of the oral tradition.¹ Actual oral performances show a number of variants that have not been recorded in written texts.²

In 2011, I had the opportunity to work with Dongba priests from the Ruke sub-group.³ I was in charge of recording traditional heritage, including documentation of the local language and their scripture. "Ruke" is the Romanized transcription of the endonym [zɿlqʰəŋ], which has been rendered as "Zher-khin" (Rock 1938), "Ruoka" (Li et al. 1972:125; Li 1984:32), "Ruanke" (He and Guo 1985:40; Guo and He 1999:7), and "Ruka" (Zhong 2010). Ruke people

¹ The idea of variability is considered by many folklorists to be the norm in the folk context, e.g., Hymes (1962:19), Toelken (1979:11), Foley (1991:6-8), Honko (2000:19-20), and Bauman (2004:3-8). In the case of studies on Chinese oral-connected traditions, Bender (2003) and Børdahl and Wan (2010) have offered insights on the interplay between orality and writing. The former is concerned with the Suzhou *pingtan* tradition, while the latter deals with Yangzhou professional storytelling.

² Fine (1984:94-95) has similarly pointed out that the written medium could not fully record the live performance.

³ I participated in the National Social Science Fund Project entitled Zhongguo Xi'nan Diqu Binwei Wenzhi Qiangjiu, Zhengli, yu Yanjiu 'Interpretation and Rescue of Endangered Scripts and Bibliographies in Southwest China' (10&ZD123) advised by Professor Zhao Liming.

have another endonym [nɔʎzyʎ] 'Na people living in lower and warmer places' (from my fieldwork notes).¹

Ruke Dongba culture is considered a sub-branch of Dongbaism (He 2002:255). Moreover, their glyphs have been classified as an independent category among the common Dongba glyphs in Li et al. (1972). A Dongba priest named Shi Maning cooperated with me in translating this Dongba scripture. In 1974, Shi Maning was born in Youmi Village, which has been transcribed as "Yaomi" in Chinese (Li et al. 1972:125).² Youmi Village is one of the settlements of Ruke People, a branch of the Naxi People. A Dongba priest and spiritual leader of the Na people, Shi Maning oversees various ceremonies locally. The worship of deities and ancestors, funerals, misfortune removals, weddings, beam erections, and so on are examples of rituals he leads. He began learning Dongba traditional culture when he was fifteen from his uncle (b. 1947).

One of the Dongba scriptures translated during my fieldwork is *Longwang de Chansheng 'The Advent of Dragons*.³ In the Dongba religious tradition, dragons called "shu" [ʂyʎ] (Li et al. 1972:147) are the gods of nature (Jackson 1979:246, McKhann 1993:103). The scripture is a six-page text written on Dongba paper, 27.5 cm in length and 10.2 cm in height. The chanting of the scripture is a rhythmic prose composition used in the worship of dragons and describes the genesis of the family of dragons, the gods of nature.

During the interviews, I twice recorded the translation of this Dongba scripture with Dongba Shi Maning. The first time, he translated the scripture into Chinese after having recited it paragraph-by-paragraph. The second time, in order to check the pronunciation of each Dongba glyph, he read the scripture word-by-word. He then recited the verses page-by-page.

¹ Having noticed similar endonyms and languages, Mu (2010:100) proposed a single identity for these ethnic groups - Na Xi Zuqun, a term that means "series of all ethnic groups with the endonym Na." It can thus be rendered as "Na-ish people ethnic group." The suffix "-ish" is used to form adjectives from the nouns, e.g., "British" and "Spanish."

² Located in Labo Township, Ninglang County, Yunnan Province.

³ In the local language, the title is transcribed as [ʂutʰuʎteyʎ]. The three syllables are "dragon," "to arrive," and "to appear," respectively.

The fieldwork notes of this piece highlight the inconsistency and variability of the theme of five colors corresponding to the five spatial directions.

The term "theme" bears close similarity to (in some other folklore theories) "function" (Propp 1968), "motif" (Veselovsky 1913), and "element" (Bédier 1893). In the field of oral tradition studies, Lord's (1938:440) understanding of "theme" as "a subject unit, a group of ideas, regularly employed by a singer" resonates with Parry's definition of formula ("a group of words which is regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea," (1930:80).¹

The five spatial directions refer to "east," "south," "west," "north," and "center." In the text, five colors are used to describe the subjects located in each of these directions, e.g., the eggs from which the dragon families were incubated from, the dragon families, the mountains, lakes, and rocks. Five colors include "white," "black," "green," "mottled," and "yellow," or, sometimes "red" instead of "yellow."

In this paper, I present my analysis of this issue, with comparison to other versions of Dongba/Daba scriptures that involve related content. Here, "Daba" is the Romanized transcription of the local word for "priest" ([daɪpaɪ]) in the Eastern dialect of the Moso people. The Eastern branch of Dongbaism is called "Dabaism" due to dialectal variations (He 1989:52).

INCONSISTENCY IN THE RUKE DONGBA SCRIPTURE *THE ADVENT OF DRAGONS*

In compiling the interlinear translation of *The Advent of Dragons*, I noted inconsistencies both between the two translated narratives (mentioned above) and within individual sentences. Inconsistencies between the two translated narratives refer to the different details given when telling the same story at various times. However, there are also inconsistencies within sentences. For example, a sentence may

¹ For a general introduction to oral composition theory, see Foley (1988).

start with elements inherent in the four colors, finishing, then, with the transformation of the five streams of these elements. Or, for example, the verse in the thirteenth grid on the first page (labeled as p1-13) is explained as:

The white dew came from the upper side, the black dew came from the lower side, the five streams of dew, with the color of black, white, yellow, and purple, transformed by magic, and three ice columns emerged from the ground.¹

The second translation reads: "Three drops rained from the sky, three columns of ice emerged from the ground."

Verses of grid p1-13 translated by Dongba Shi Maning:



The First Translation

IPA	gʌɿ	nɿɿ	zɿɿ	pʰuɿ	tʰuɿ
Ch.	上	(由)	露	白	到,
En.	up	from	dew	white	come out
IPA	miɿ	nɿɿ	zɿɿ	naɿ	tʰuɿ
Ch.	下	(由)	露	黑	到,
En.	down	from	dew	black	come out

¹ In written texts, Dongba scriptures are segmented by grids. Each grid represents a unit of the verses.

IPA	zɪ̯l	pʰuul	zɪ̯l	noɻ	zɪ̯l
Ch.	露	白	露	黑	露
En.	dew	white	dew	black	dew
IPA	ɕiɻ	zɪ̯l	hæɻ	zɪ̯l	iɪ
Ch.	黄	露	紫	露	连
En.	yellow	dew	purple	dew	conj.
IPA	ŋuaɻ	mbaɻ	puɻ	paɻ	biɻ
Ch.	五	股	变幻		做
En.	five	stream	transform		do
IPA	dyɻ	dzuɻ	dzuɻ	ɕoɻ	qʰəɻ
Ch.	地	冰	冰	三	柱
En.	ground	ice	ice	three	column
IPA	gaɻ	lɛɻ	zuɻ		
Ch.	上	冒			
En.	up	to emerge			

Trans. The white dew came from the up-side, and the black dew came from the down-side. The white dew, black dew, yellow dew, purple dew, the five streams of dew, transformed all together. Three ice columns emerged from the ground.

The Second Translation

Pic.					
IPA	məɻ	paɻ	laɻ	xiɻ	pʰuul
Ch.	天			雨	白
En.	sky			rain	white

Pic.

IPA syɿ tʰuɑɿ ɬuɿ nɿɿ

Ch. 三 滴 一 日

En. three drop one day

Pic.   

IPA ndzæɿ dyɿ dzyɿ dzyɿ

Ch. (曾) 地 冰 冰

En. already ground ice ice

Pic.     

IPA syɿ qʰəɿ gɿɿ lɛɿ zɿɿ

Ch. 三 柱 上 冒

En. three column up to emerge

Trans. Three drops rained from the sky and three columns of ice emerged from the ground.

In the first translation, there are five streams of dew, but only four colors of dew are mentioned. This discrepancy also appears in another verse in the same pattern, from p1-5 to p1-7.

Verses of grids p1-5 to p1-7 in the first translation by Dongba Shi Maning:

Pic.



IPA ɑɿ ʂiɿ gɿɿ nɿɿ

Ch. 古时候 上 (由)

En. long ago up from

Pic.



IPA

hẽl

p^huɹ

t^huɹ

Ch.

风

白

到,

En.

wind

white

come out

Pic.



IPA

miɹ

niɹ

hẽl

naɹ

t^huɹ

Ch.

下

(由)

风

黑

到,

En.

down

from

wind

black

come out



(p1-6)

Pic.



IPA

hẽl

p^huɹ

hẽl

naɹ

Ch.

风

白

风

黑

En.

wind

white

wind

black

Pic.

IPA

hẽl

eiɹ

hẽl

hẽɹ

Ch.

风

黄

风

紫

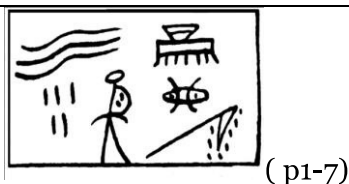
En.

wind

yellow

wind

purple



(p1-7)

Pic.				
IPA	hẽl	in	ɲuaɭ	mbaɭ
Ch.	风	(连)	五	股
En.	wind	conj.	five	stream
Pic.				
IPA	puwɭ	paɭ	biɭ	
Ch.	变幻		做	
En.	transform		do	

Trans. Long ago, the white wind came from the up-side, the black wind came from the down-side. The white wind, black wind, yellow wind, purple wind, the five streams of wind transformed all together.

After the transformation, five eggs in various colors, including white, black, yellow, and purple (p1-18), are created. However, according to the latter part of the scripture that describes the incubation of the eggs, the yellow egg is missing and a red egg arises in its place.

Verses of grid p1-18 in the first translation by Dongba Shi Maning:



Pic.					
IPA	kuɿ	p ^h uɿ	kuɿ	naɿ	kuɿ eiɿ
Ch.	蛋	白	蛋	黑	蛋 黄
En.	egg	white	egg	black	egg yellow
Pic.					
IPA	kuɿ	hẽɿ	(kuɿ	ndzæɿ) ¹	
Ch.	蛋	紫	蛋	彩	
En.	egg	purple	egg	mottled	
Pic.					
IPA	kuɿ	ŋuaɿ	liɿ	t ^h uɿ	
Ch.	蛋	五	粒	到	
En.	egg	five	cl. item	come out	

Trans. The white egg, black egg, yellow egg, purple egg, the mottled egg, the five eggs came out.

The elements participating in the transformation are also different. In the first translation, the elements are dew and ice. In the

¹ The mottled egg was missing when Dongba Shi Maning was reading this paragraph. When he translated these verses into Chinese, he added the mottled egg.

second version, they are rain and ice. This could be due to the variable interpretation of the glyph . According to Li et al. (1972:10), the Dongba glyphs for "rain" and "dew" are similar:  [huɿ] "rain" and  [ndzɿɿ] "dew." Moreover, the pictogram , with only one drop from the glyph for "rain," represents "milk" or "dew." Therefore, it is possible that seeing the glyph  "three" in the following verse, the Dongba priest interpreted  as three drops of something. With the similarity between the pictograms for "rain" and "dew," the misinterpretation in the second translation became "three drops of rain." This could possibly be because the Dongba priests were focused on the written text, and paid less attention to the meaning of the verses.

According to the second translation (the glyph-by-glyph explanation), the syntactic structure of the verse expressed by the grid p1-13 differs from the verses with the five streams of elements making transformations from p1-5 to p1-12. The numeral in this verse is three.

Therefore, in the first translation, the interpretation of  as "dew" is probably the original meaning of the glyph, while the numeral following the former verses - "five" - is inconsistent with the written text. Conversely, in the second translation, the interpretation of  as "rain" is likely a variant of the verse, while the numeral "three," used to describe the rain drops, appears to be consistent with the syntactic format shown by the second verse written in this grid.

Inconsistencies and contradictions found in epics have long been a thorny issue in Homeric studies. Lord (1938) proposed the analogy with Slavic oral epic, showing that inconsistencies originated from oral poetry's association of different topics and formulaic structures, i.e., inconsistencies result from a combination of themes and formulas from the singer's repertoire. The song in the singer's mind is "a flexible plan of themes" leading to the fluidity of songs. Therefore, the concept of the stability of a song does not include the singer's varying formulations (Lord 1988:99).

Basing my analysis on my field notes, syntactic parallelism - the rhetoric structure commonly attested in oral poetry (Lord 1988:35) -

may have contributed to the development of variability in reading the verses represented by pictograms. Such a language structure in oral traditions is defined by "the law of Bilateralism (*Le bilatéralisme*)" established by Jousse (1969:29), an English translation of which can be found in Sienaert (1990:96):

Man can only express himself in accordance with his physical structure which is bilateral—left and right, up and down, back and forth—and like his global and manual expression, his verbal expression will tend to be bilateral, to balance symmetrically, following a physical and physiological need for equilibrium.

Such a dyadic worldview has also been attested in anthropological studies, e.g., Du (2002:29).

The rhythm in Dongba oral poems significantly shapes the different versions. In Dongba scriptures, most verses consist of five or seven syllables. Verses with three, nine, or eleven syllables are also used (Li 2015:2). According to my fieldwork observations, the longer verses may be divided into shorter meters more commonly applied in Dongba chanting. For example, the verse based on grid p3-16 in the first translation contains eleven syllables and can be acoustically analyzed through a pattern of seven syllables: 2-2-2-2-1-1-1. The first four meters are semantically connected as an adjective group modifying the description of the dragon, while the last three syllables constitute a phrase. In this case, the omission of the fifth segment (phrase in the structure of "element+color") in the five-color system enables Dongba priests to adapt the verse into a more commonly used meter frame: 2-2-2-2- [...]. In the parentheses, there are odd number of meters. For example, the metric pattern of the verse of grid 1-6 to 1-7 is: 2-2-2-2- [2-2-1-1-1].

The verse of grid p3-16 in the first translation by Dongba Shi Maning:

IPA	nɿŋ	iaŋ	waŋ	iaŋ
Ch.	吉	献	祥	献
En.	luck	to give	auspice	to give
IPA	xuŋ	iaŋ	ŋgeŋ	iaŋ
Ch.	福	献	富	献
En.	fortune	to give	wealth	to give
IPA	ʂuŋ	quŋ	tʰuŋ	
Ch.	龙	一	出	
En.	dragon	one	come out	

Trans. A dragon giving humans luck, auspiciousness, fortune, and wealth emerges.

Verses of grids p1-6 and p1-7 in the first translation by Dongba Shi Maning:

IPA	hẽŋ	pʰuŋ	hẽŋ	naŋ
Ch.	风	白	风	黑
En.	wind	white	wind	black
IPA	hẽŋ	ɕiŋ	hẽŋ	hẽŋ
Ch.	风	黄	风	紫
En.	wind	yellow	wind	purple

IPA	hẽl	in	ɲuaɭ	mbaɭ
Ch.	风	(连)	五	股
En.	wind	conj.	five	stream
IPA	puwɭ	paɭ	biɭ	
Ch.	变幻		做	
En.	transform		do	
Trans.	The white wind, black wind, yellow wind, purple wind, the five streams of wind transformed all together.			

Applying these established mechanisms, priests recite the verses using the rhythmic patterns they prefer or the ones they are more familiar with. Dongba people in turn, are able to understand the story through their cultural background and specific knowledge. During this process, details such as the color representing the south changing from green to yellow and the north indicated by the color green, are insignificant to the tellers/singers and to local audiences. The religious facts thus gain flexibility when reformuled in the priests' oral compositions. Over the long term, the formularized facts could be observed as geographical variations. The five-color system issue is a highlighted case.

Meanwhile, voluntary omission in Dongba scripture leaves space for flexibility in vocal verses. Omission of glyphs is a common phenomenon in Dongba scripture. The written words are generally content words, while those unrepresented through glyphs are function words (Fu 1982:6, Wang 1988:124, Yu 2009:16). Therefore, they can correspond to various versions of oral texts that contain these "keywords."

Moreover, data collected with Dongba Shi Maning also reflect the omission of words in chanting/telling the verses. Since the five-color systems are popular elements in Dongba culture, the fifth object with the color "mottled" is often omitted as a default element after the other four colors are written/told. Such omission can be identified in the first translation of *The Advent of Dragons*, verses in grid p1-15 and

p1-18, as well as in the *Du Sa E Tu de Gushi 'The Story of Du Sa E Tu'* (Li et al. 1978:186).¹ In short, omission of glyphs (written texts) or words (oral compositions) do not influence the transmission of the five-color systems as an entire message. Moreover, accustomed to such omissions, Dongba Shi Maning applied the five-color system of landscape (e.g., mountains, lakes, and rocks in the five directions) to the verses in which the keywords include "white," "black," and "five" (p1-6, p1-7, p1-9, p1-11, p1-13) in the first translation.

The inconsistencies in these verses on the transformation of natural elements show non-fixed correspondences among colors and numerals. Dongba Shi Maning approves his second translated version in order to give reasonable explanations to the scripture's content. In this case, considering both aspects (the meaning of the glyph  and the verse pattern), the verse of the grid p1-13 would be: "Three drops of dew rained from the sky, three ice columns emerged from the ground." This solution is plausible, since Dongba priests do not seek "perfect" versions when they are reciting or chanting the scriptures. However, it is premature to present the translation with a correct variable refined by the interpreter.

Variability and inconsistency in single sentences reconstructed during the process of translating the scripture are specific reflections of the oral style of Dongba scriptures. Furthermore, analysis of the "dew" issue reveals that the first translation (transcribed directly from the oral chants) is closer than the second to the memorized version in each Dongba's individual inventory of formulas. There are two reasons for this. First, the verse represented by grid p1-13 applied the same metrical pattern as the parallel verses before it (e.g.: p1-5 to p1-7, p1-8 to p1-9), which means they were composed according to the same rhythmic mechanism.

Secondly, in the second translation the syntactic pattern of the verse in grid p1-13 appears to vary from the parallel verses that precede it. Such personal repertoires emerge from "habitual usage," while the person using it no longer repeats words or phrases after having

¹ The Naxi title is transcribed in IPA as [do˥sa˥ŋa˥t˥u˥tɕʌ˥ldzo˥]. The first four syllables represent the name of the protagonist of the story. The last two syllables mean "story."

acquired them consciously (Lord 1988:36). This concept helps in explaining the inconsistencies of the color issue mentioned here, including the five colors of the basic elements in the transformation process and the eggs as the products of the process.

THE FIVE-COLOR THEME IN DIFFERENT BRANCHES OF DONGBAISM AND DABAISM

I have discussed possible oral compositional mechanisms contributing to the formation of inconsistencies spotted in the vocal text of the Ruke Dongba scripture *The Advent of Dragons*. An inconsistent issue concerned the color corresponding to the south. In this section, I explore this topic and analyze a cultural fact that also appears inconsistent among Daba and Dongba branches: the five-color theme.

FIELDWORK DATA

There are two main five-color systems in *The Advent of Dragons*. One system in the beginning of the scripture depicts the generation of the five eggs with the same color of the lake from where they were produced. The five colors are: white (written , pronounced [pʰuŋ]), "black" ( [nɑŋ]), "yellow" ( [eiŋ]), "purple"  [hæŋ], and "mottled" [ndzæŋ].¹ In the written text, the fifth color seems to be an undescribed default expression (p1-18). Further in the scripture, the eggs are incubated and different dragon families emerge and, in place of a yellow egg, there is a red one ( [hŋŋ]).

The five colors correspond to the five directions in Dongba culture: east, south, west, north, and center (He 1989:141-142). In the scripture I focus on here, in the east, there are white mountains and

¹ The concept of "mottled" in Dongba glyphs is marked by adding dots. For example,  is the pictogram for "dragon" (p1-2), and  is the glyph representing the "mottled dragon family" (p5-12).

lakes; in the south, there are red mountains and yellow lakes; in the west, there are black mountains and lakes; in the north, there are green

( [hǎŋ]) mountains and lakes; in the center, there are mottled mountains and lakes.¹ The dragon families living in the five places have the same coloration as the mountains there. The yellow egg mentioned in grid p1-18 corresponds to the red egg of the south dragon family (p3-7, p3-8, p3-17). The mountains and lakes in the south are red and yellow, respectively, while the mountains and lakes in the other four directions have a single color.

These two five-color systems (the eggs and the landscape) recur in describing the lake breeding the eggs, the eggs at the origin of dragon families, the mountains and lakes in the five directions, and the dragon families living in the five places along the five directions. Relatively stable factors here include the color white associated with east, the color black associated with the west, green with the north; and mottled with the center. The color associated with the south appears to be unstable.

In another scripture used for the worship of dragons, entitled *Gei Longwang Sayao 'Giving Medicine to Dragons'*,² preserved by Dongba Shi Maning, the color of the dragon family in the south is yellow, the mountain in the south is red, and the lake in the south is yellow. The corresponding verse is transcribed in the grids p12-4 and p12-5: "To escort the yellow dragon's sons and daughters to the yellow lake at the foot of the red mountain and cliff in the south."

A paragraph elicited from a Daba scripture, *Xinnian Shaoxiang 'Lighting Incense on the New Year's Arrival'*,³ may

¹ In Dongba writing,  is the pictogram for "turquoise" (Li Lincan et al. 1972:112). The color it represents has been translated as "green" by academics, e.g., Li Lincan et al. (1978:186). When translating the former part and the latter part of this Dongba scripture, Dongba Shi Maning gave two Chinese translations for the same glyph , "purple" and "green." According to his description, it refers to "the color of the mountain during sunset." Since it does not really correspond to the Chinese concept of "green," Shi Maning used two words to describe the color.

² The title in local language is transcribed [ʃuʌtʂʰiŋkʰuʌ(meŋɣuʌ)]. The syllables represent "dragon," "medicine," "to put," "kind," and "copula."

³ The title in local language is [kʰvʌʃiʌsoʌtqɛ]. The four syllables are "year,"

represent another reference to the five-color system related to the five directions. The dialect reflected in the Daba scripture is from the eastern branch of the Naxi language that is coded as ISO 693-3, "nru." The Latin transcription of the endonym of the eastern branch people is Na.¹ This Daba scripture was collected from Daba Tsi'er from Lijiazui Village, Wujiao Township, Muli County, Sichuan Province, during my field trip in September 2011.² Significant verses are excerpted below:

nił mił t^hvł, lvł p^huuł t^hal mvł ts^hil,
To build up shell-white house in the east,

ził ts^hil mił, hãł sił t^hal mvł ts^hil,
To build up gold-yellow house in the south,

nił mił gvł, ts^hwæł nqł t^hal mvł ts^hil,
To build up jade-black house in the west,

hỹł goł loł, ?wãł zuł t^hal mvł ts^hil,
To build up turquoise-green house in the north,

mvł nuł dił lił gvł, tsvł tsvł t^hal mvł ts^hil.
To build up diamond-blue house in the center.

According to the lines above, five materials are used to define the buildings' colors in the five directions. In the east, the palace is white as a shell; in the south, yellow as gold; in the west, black as jade; in the north, green as turquoise; and in the center, blue as diamonds.

Based on related data from various scriptures, one would conclude the color combined with the direction south to be yellow since the place where the respective dragon family lives is the yellow

"new," "incense," and "to light," respectively.

¹ The dialect of Dongba scriptures from Youmi Village, Labo Township, Ninglang County, Yunnan Province is considered an intermediate branch between Naxi and Na.

² "Muli County" is the shortened form for "Muli Tibetan Autonomous County" located in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture.

lake at the feet of the red mountain and cliff. The scripture contains two types of five-color systems. One is for the landscape (i.e., mountains and cliffs, lakes, and houses), and the other is for the subjects (i.e., the eggs and the dragon families). In *The Advent of Dragons*, the yellow egg produced after the transformation at the beginning is consistent with this color system. In the latter part, the description of the incubation of the red egg in the south could be due to influences derived from the combination of various five-color systems.

The Five-Color Theme and *Wu Xing*

Other academic publications suggest that further investigations are needed on this five-color theme issue. For example, in *The Story of Du Sa E Tu* (mentioned above) the color representing the dragon family in the south is green ([hæɿ]) and in the north, the color is yellow ([ʃwɿ]); Li et al. 1978:186). The pronunciation of the local language is provided by Dongba He Cai from Ludian Township, Yulong County, Lijiang, Yunnan Province. The dialect there belongs to the western branch of the Naxi language and it differs from the other two dialects analyzed in this study.

Similarly, in the Dongba Scripture *Hongshui de Gushi* 'The Story of the Flood',¹ there are verses about the act of building columns in the five directions with five materials. The material for the column in the south is turquoise () , indicating "green," while the material for the column in the north is gold () , indicating "yellow" (Li et al. 1978:30). In other words, the colors related to south and north are opposite to the ones from the data collected during my fieldwork.

In Dongba culture, [ndziɿ wɛɿ wɔɿ syɿ] refers to the five basic elements of the world (Li et al. 1978:115). The first two syllables

¹ The Naxi title is readable as [ts'oɿmburɿt'uɿ]. The first syllable means "human, nationality," the second means "to migrate," and the third means "to appear." This Dongba cultural term refers to a myth about the origin of human beings. The Chinese title "The Story of the Flood" is given according to the main plot of the story.

represent the ancient name of the five basic elements and may be transcribed "Tsiwe." The third syllable means "five" and the fourth means "type," literally meaning "five types of Tsiwe." It is comparable to the Chinese concept *wu xing* that formed in the late Western Zhou Dynasty (1046-770 BC) (Zuo 1981:1502).¹ Liu (1993) has traced the origin of *wu xing* to the ten-month solar calendar of the Yi. In this paper, I use the Romanized transcription *wu xing* to refer to "[ndziɪ wɛɪ wɑɪ syɪ]."

Rock (1955:117) documents the relationship between the five colors and *wu xing*:

From white thread, wood comes out; from green thread, fire comes out; from black thread, iron comes out; from yellow thread, water comes out; from mottled thread, earth comes out.

Here, the five-color threads were used to make clothes for people who had passed away.

Records on the Dongba *wu xing* can be found in Dongba scriptures and typically feature a frog figure called "Bage" ([ba geq] in Romanized Naxi, [paɪ kaɪ] in IPA (Li et al. 1978:115). In Naxi, the segment "Ba" means "frog," and "ge" means "subject" (Li 1986:216).

This can be seen in Fu's (2012:193-194) analysis of *Bai Bianfu Qijing Ji 'The White Bat's Search for Sacred Books'*.² The verses written in grids from 76 to 78 depict how the body parts of the sacred frog correspond to the five directions and to *wu xing*: Frog's Hair - East - Wood, Frog's Blood - South - Fire, Frog's Bone - West - Iron, Frog's Bladder - North - Water, Frog's Flesh - Center - Earth. The five-color system is not mentioned in this recording. *Mosuo zu Zhanbu Qiyuan de Gushi 'The Origin of Moso People's Divination'* in Li et al. (1978:115)

¹ Cultural concepts such as *wu xing* and the twelve zodiac signs are widely noted in southwest China among various ethnic groups, including the Han and Tibetans. In Dongba culture, the divination figure "Bage" is a visual representation of the combination of *wu xing* and zodiac signs. Designations in the Dongba "Bage" figure and how it is used in divination exhibit both Han and Tibetan influences (He 1989:139-145).

² The Naxi title *ad hoc* is transcribed as "[¹tɕh³gu¹kɔ³ʂo].". The four syllables represent the notions of "dirt," "to chase," "scripture," and "to seek for," respectively.

has similar content: Frog's Body - East - Wood, Frog's Mouth - South - Fire, Frog's Bone - West - Iron, Frog's Gall Bladder - North - Water, Frog's Meat - Center - Earth.

If we combine the above analysis with the data provided by Rock, the correspondences between the five directions, the five basic elements (*wu xing*), and the five colors are: East - Wood - White, South - Fire - Green, West - Iron - Black, North - Water - Yellow, Center - Earth - Mottled.

FIG 1 is a fresco at the Dongba Culture School in Wumu Village, Baoshan Township, Yulong County that illustrates the five directions and the five-color system. In the picture, an arrow goes through the sacred frog's belly. The frog's head, the frog's tail, the arrow's head, and the arrow's tail are marked with Dongba glyphs meaning south, west, north, and east, respectively. The twelve Zodiac animals distributed evenly around the circle also indicate the border of the four directions. The background is filled according to the colors representing each direction: East - White, South - Green, West - Black, North - Yellow, Center - Blue.

FIG 1. Fresco in the Dongba Culture School in Wumu Village, Baoshan Township, Yulong County, Yunnan Province (January 2011, by Xu Duoduo).



Comparing the five-color theme in Dongba and Daba scriptures and data related to *wu xing* suggests that similarities include the respective colors: east is white, west is black, and for the center is blue (landscape color) or mottled (dragon family's color).

Colors representing south and north display geographical differentiations. Data collected from Daba in Lijiazui Village (Na area, eastern branch of Dongba culture) and Dongba in Youmi Village (intermediate area between Naxi and Na people) show that the south corresponds to yellow (the related material is gold) and the north corresponds to green (the related gem is turquoise). Conversely, data from Rock (1955) and Li et al. (1978) collected in the Lijiang area (Naxi territory, western branch of Dongba culture), state that the south is connected with green and the north is linked to yellow.

FORMULARIZED FACTS RELATED TO THE FIVE-COLOR THEME

According to the 'settings' of *wu xing*, the five spatial directions correspond to five elements, and the five elements represent five colors. In other words, apart from being a formulaic expression in oral composition text, the five-color theme is generated from religious cultural elements in which the correspondence among colors and spatial directions should be fixed. However, the correspondences among colors and items appear inconsistent in the analyzed scripture. This reminds the author "to recognize the historical and cultural specificity" and "to explore a broader range of alternatives" (Bauman and Briggs 1990:60).

A significant detail is that the five-color theme did not arise contemporarily with the *wu xing* theme, according to currently available data of Dongba scripture. For example, in the Dongba scripture *'White Bat's Search for Sacred Books*, colors are not mentioned in describing the generation of *wu xing*. The common point of these two themes is that they are both related to the five spatial directions.

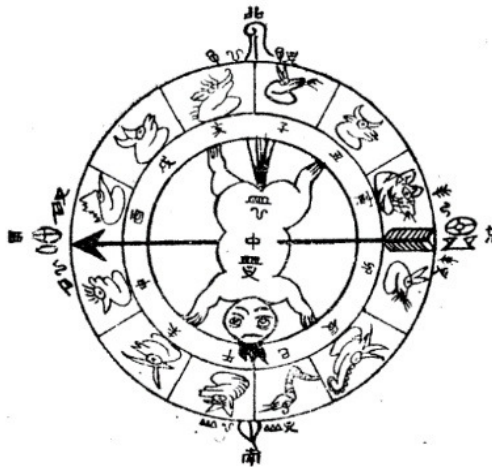
The position of the Naxi frog figure should also be noted. In Wumu Village, the frog's head towards the south (FIG 1) is oriented to the upper point of the circle, while the frog's tail to the north is oriented to the lower point of the circle. However, the frog figure depicted in Li (1986:219) shows the frog's head towards the south is at the lower point, while the frog's tail towards the north is at the upper point. In other words, the circle has been turned 180 degrees.

Due to increased contact with Han people since Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the Dongba west branch living in the Lijiang area was influenced by Han cultural traditions (Jackson 1978:9-13, Awang Qinrao 1993, He 2001:123-126). Such a rotation of the geographical coordinates, from south at the upper point and north at the lower point to the opposite (north at the upper point and south at the lower point), could represent one of the changes derived from Han cultural influence, according to which "north" corresponds to the "upper" direction and "south" to the "lower" one (Li 1997:243).

The geographical coordinates of the eastern Moso and western Moso differ. The eastern branch remains deeply connected with the old tradition, while the western branch has changed, becoming the same as that of the Han people.¹

The western branch of the scriptures is the major branch of Dongbaism with the highest percentage of population among the different Moso communities (He 1989:56). The different facts attest in the western branch from the five-color theme in the eastern branch of Dongbaism (the Dongbaism of the Ruke people and Dabaism of the Na people) reveal variation in religious content other than dialectal differentiation.

FIG 2. Frog in Li (1986:219).



¹ Scholars have hypothesized that the Bon religion is the origin of Dongbaism (Rock 1952:3-4, Jackson 1978:291, He 1989:41-51).

Based on these two aspects (the common *wu xing* culture in the Sino-Tibetan context and Dongba scriptures), I suggest a possible explanation of the inconsistencies /variations among the combinations of the five-colors, the five directions, and the five basic elements: it is likely that variations are produced by the association of these two themes.

Here is a more detailed reconstruction of the origins and developments of the two patterns. First, the five basic elements and the five spatial directions become a theme and, secondly, the five colors corresponding to the five spatial directions are another theme. Third, in Dongba traditions, the position of the five directions was: up - frog's head - South, down - frog's tail - North, left - arrow's tail - East, right - arrow's head - West. Fourth, the five colors correspond to the five elements originating from the frog: frog's head (where frog's blood emerges) - fire - green, frog's tail (where frog's urine comes out) - water - yellow, arrow's head - iron - black, arrow's tail - wood - white.

Five, with the later influence of Han culture (in which the five directions show to be 180 degrees clockwise rotated), the positions of the frog representing the corresponding directions have also 'turned' in the region of the west branch of Dongbaism, i.e., up - North - frog's tail, down - South - frog's head, left - West - arrow's head, and right - East - arrow's tail. Sixth, when the combination of these two themes is reconstructed, the south at which the frog's head is pointed becomes associated with the color green, while the north where the frog's tail is 'located' corresponds to the color yellow.

Different correspondences among the colors (yellow and green) and the directions (south and north) could represent a kind of confusion or accumulation of different cultural layers (by Dongba priests of various branches). However, this specific phenomenon of the relationship between spatial directions and colors can also be interpreted as a formulaic re-association, since both patterns are unified facts attested within the various branches of Dongbaism. These themes are formularized, i.e., the facts/details of these subjects are narrated through certain formulas. When Dongba priests have accumulated their own inventory of formulas, they express the themes through their personal vernacular habits as whole messages, without thinking word-by-word.

Moreover, these formulas are also familiar to their followers/disciples as well. Regarding the five-color theme, different branches have different variants in their scriptures. Dongba priests, generally focused only on the context of their own branches, and may not know or care about the situation of other branches. Inconsistencies among the colors with the correspondence to numbers and objects derive from the combination of formulas involving different color systems. It is possible to discover that, in oral performance, people do not attempt to look for the "correct" (original) version of the scriptures. However, being involved in the formulaic context of Dongba culture, these color patterns are delivered as a whole message produced by mentioning several keywords. It is possible to affirm that inconsistencies, variability, and mistakes highlighted in the word-by-word translation were insignificant details for Dongba priests during the oral chanting/story telling.

Flexibilities become, in this context, characteristic features produced by religious and cultural concepts elaborated through formulaic mechanisms. The aim of this procedure is to pass down relevant cultural messages through several keywords (useful also according to mnemotechnical aspects/needs), adapting messages into rhythmic patterns by omitting single parts. This process produces variations in different branches of Dongba culture.

CONCLUSION

This study considers two specific formulaic aspects of the five-color theme in Dongba oral tradition: the five-color theme corresponding to the landscape, e.g., mountains and cliffs, lakes, and houses, in the five spatial directions; and the five-color theme corresponding to the dragon families living along the five spatial directions. The five-color theme correlates with *wu xing*, the five basic elements of the world.

After examining publications on Dongba scriptures and materials on Dongbaism and Dabaism collected during my fieldwork, I have offered a preliminary explanation of particular cases of inconsistency and variability in this oral tradition. This diverges from

the second translation, which is a word-by-word textual restitution strictly conducted according to the Dongba written texts.

The different versions of a specific scripture given by a single Dongba priest could be interpreted according to this principle: each performance in telling/chanting could be considered a new composition based around the keywords (memorized or cued by the written text) of the story. This aspect is similar to the description given by Lord regarding Slavic oral poetry: "Each performance is the specific song, and at the same time it is the generic song" (1988:101).

Despite the differences between the two translations of the Dongba Scripture *The Advent of Dragons*, both textual restitutions are consistent and coherent within themselves. In other words, the published translations of Dongba scriptures, or the fixed versions, compiled according to the glyphs (that function as mnemonic devices), are not the only (right or official) versions. The orally composed verses may show flexibilities, which are adjustments made to the themes (generally widespread structures) shared by Dongba priests.

Variability is associated with the notion of inconsistency defined in Oral Composition Theory. After years of learning and repeating the verses by heart, Dongba priests have refined their own formulaic strategy to tell and interpret the scriptures according to their experience and traditional knowledge. The rhythmic habits, as well as the combination of themes, have both contributed to the inconsistent verses represented by the same glyphs.

Besides formulaic strategies, I have extended the analysis on the correspondences of the five colors and spatial directions to other branches of Dongbaism and Dabaism. This comparison work has revealed a geographical pattern applicable to the texts generated by the five-color theme. Such synchronic differentiation may have derived from contact with neighboring cultures later on stabilized through the formulaic composition.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Bage 巴格

Bai Bianfu Qujing Ji 白蝙蝠取经记

Baoshan 宝山

Daba 达巴

Dongba 东巴

Dongba Jiao 东巴教

Dongba Jing 东巴经

Du Sa E Tu de Gushi 都萨峨突的故事*Gei Longwang Sayao* 给龙王洒药

He Cai 和才

Hongshui de Gushi 洪水的故事

Labo 拉伯

Liangshan 凉山

Lijiang 丽江

Lijiazui 利家嘴

Longwang de Chansheng 龙王的产生

Ludian 鲁甸

Moso 麼些

Mosuo zu Zhanbu Qiyuan de Gushi 麼些族占卜起源的故事

Muli 木里

Na 纳

Na Xi Zuqun 纳系族群

Naxi 纳西

Naxi Dongba Guji Yizhu Quanji 纳西东巴古籍译注全集

Ninglang 宁蒗

pingtan 评弹

Ruanke 阮可

Ruka 汝卡

Ruke 汝可

Ruoka 若喀

Shi Maning 石玛宁

Sichuan 四川

Shu 署

Suzhou 苏州

Tsi'er 次儿

Wu Xing 五行

Wujiao 屋脚

Wumu 吾木

Xinnian Shaoxiang 新年烧香

Yangzhou 扬州

Yaomi 药眯

Yi 彝

Youmi 油米

Yulong 玉龙

Yunnan 云南

Zhao Liming 赵丽明

Zhongguo Xi'nan Diqu Binwen Wenzi Qiangjiu, Zhengli, yu Yanjiu 中国西南地区濒危文字抢救、整理与研究